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UNEQUAL CITY

HUMANISING THE POOR, CREATING A LIVEABLE CITY

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Recently, I was walking around in Keraniganj, with the hope of making sense of this gritty extension of Old Dhaka across the Buriganga River. Keraniganj exemplified urbanism at its extreme, to say the least. Everywhere there were signs of both poverty and entrepreneurial energy. Nobody was sitting idle. Everybody was doing

do they have to work at such a tender age? Were they helping their impoverished parents? What are we doing as a society to prohibit children's suffering? What are the social and urban costs of a society failing its children?

As much as it was heartbreaking to see kids robbed of their normal childhood, this sister-brother working team raises a

conference in Dhaka, jointly organised by the Power and Participation Research Centre and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. High-ranking World Bank and UNDP officials, NGO leaders, activists, mayors, academics, and think-tank policy analysts attended the conference. Experts presented a series of talks, supported by an impressive body of data. I learned a lot at the meeting, particularly from many self-motivated social activists, who have been spearheading grassroots poverty alleviation programmes through human capacity building, despite their meagre financial means.

In my own presentation during the concluding session, I sought to make a case for an attitudinal change in policies toward poverty reduction. I acknowledged that data is important for meaningful supports for the poor. But any empirical study of the poor must be coupled with a fundamental ethical position that the poor is not the *Other*. The poor shouldn't be abstracted as a social category — a binary opposite of the bourgeois self — to be quarantined for research and experimentation.

While empirical research is essential, without human compassion it bureaucratizes the concept of poverty and dehumanises the poor. The gaze of the researcher or the well-meaning donor often begins with the "otherification" of the poor. Postcolonial criticisms of the western academic going to Africa to study a tribal community and finding it "primitive" or "savage" is too crude an

life support. In his work on gender justice, Amartya Sen argued that real societal progress is made when women's empowerment takes a strong hold on the public's ethical imagination. A similar argument could be made in the case of poverty studies. An ethically based view of the poor as fellow citizens, rather than as an objectified research category, is urgently needed for any sustained alleviation of poverty.

It is time policymakers, municipal administrators, and urban planners rethought urban poverty as a problem of social justice, not just as a problem of economic development. The issue of urban poverty should be examined with a bit of moral quandary and introspection into how the class-conscious bourgeoisie defines itself as the opposite of the poor. This very definition constitutes the central problem of urban poverty. The urban poor, who grease the wheel of the city's so-called informal economy, should not be kept socially invisible behind research, big data, and class wall. The poor must be seen with a human face, not as an abstraction.

Let me provide one example. When a poor construction worker falls to his death at a building site, the middle-class feels sorry but never demands to learn the name of the victim in the news. He is a faceless, anonymous labourer, almost nonhuman. But when a "middle-class" member of society dies in a road accident in the city, he or she is a flesh-and-bones human being, with a grieving family. The victim is one of "us," therefore there is much moral outrage. In short, the poor's social invisibility is very much embedded in how we define poverty as an unrelatable experience of the *Other*. And, big data tends to preserve the invisibility of the poor.

Let us not forget, the idea of poverty has not been static in history. Both the idea and strategies for its relief have changed since the Industrial Revolution and industrial cities grew manifold in the modern era. Consider London, for instance. In the wake of the city's intense urbanisation in the 19th century, a highly divisive political and philosophical debate raged about reforming laws related to poor people.

Should the poor be the charge of the state? It was hardly a straightforward argument between state responsibility and private charity. In fact, as studies show, in 19th-century London, private charity flourished when public relief for the poor was most generous. At the centre of this vexing debate was this question: would top-down "help" (from the state and wealthy private citizens) diminish the poor's ability to take personal responsibility? So intense a philosophical discussion was it that even Tocqueville and Hegel followed the

English turmoil with much fascination.

In Bangladesh, rural microcredit initiatives, particularly Grameen Bank's and BRAC's, began in the 1970s, in many ways, to address the English question with the panacea of self-help. That is, the poor is not passive. They can figure out a way of transcending poverty if they receive some credit (without collateral). Retaining the basic premises of market economy, microcredit essentially sought to empower the poor with the ethos of entrepreneurship from below.

The dichotomy of state- and donor-driven strategies of poverty alleviation and empathetic, bottom-up, and activist NGO efforts in capacity building among the poor continues to animate the urban poverty debate in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

My own concerns have been what urban planners could do about it. They can begin by acknowledging that urban poverty is, first and foremost, a crisis of social justice. Planners and city professionals must debunk the urban mythology that the poor is a closed social group in need of an improved ghetto.

It is important not to forget that the poor are typically stuck in spatial traps, often legitimised through official planning processes. These spatial traps are slums, unsanitary industrial zones, flood-prone river banks, and footpaths. By keeping the poor on the urban fringe and hazardous areas, cities often deny them social justice and access to networks of economic mobility. By ghettoising the poor in undesirable, environmentally precarious areas, both cities and capitalistic systems seek to fortify a false sense of social hygiene.

Urban planners need to see the disenfranchised classes not as the poor but as fellow human beings who deserve, like anybody else, basic access to all urban amenities and social institutions.

Slum improvement is a tragic oxymoron, not social justice. An inclusive and liveable city treats all its citizens with fairness and humanity. Only when we agree with the moral premise of this hypothesis can we feel rightly outraged to see children like Lubna and Selim oddly playing adult roles as vegetable sellers on the streets of Keraniganj. Until these children, any children, have the normal life they deserve, we only have a city of moral poverty.

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PHOTO: ADNAN MORSHED

something. A ship was being built inches away from a three-story building. Life went on. In short, the neighbourhood seemed like a microcosm of Dhaka — a city of chaos, poverty, development, and can-do aspirations.

My most telling experience in Keraniganj, however, was a rudimentary vegetable "shop" on the side of a narrow alley, run by two minor siblings, Lubna and Selim. A piece of cloth was laid out on the street to display a small quantity of bitter melons. The sister-brother management sat against the wall, their faces full of innocent expectations that a pedestrian would soon stop and purchase their produce. By their side were a scale and weights, arranged in a pyramidal form. A recycled Nestle Lactogen Infant Formula *dibba* was used as a cash register. An existence of urban minimalism, the shop was a paradoxical sight of both endearment and heartbreak.

A few questions should agitate us, if we can suspend our bourgeois denial that this is what *tokais* (Bangladeshi artist Ronobi's archetypal street urchin) do. Why were these kids not in school? Why

broader question about urban poverty. Like other metropolises of developing economies, poverty is a ubiquitous phenomenon across cities in Bangladesh. Urban poverty is different from its rural counterpart. As Hossain Zillur Rahman has discussed, the key challenge of the urban poor is housing, while the rural poor are mainly disadvantaged by a lack of job opportunities.

It is unhelpful that in Bangladesh urban poverty is still largely understood through the lens of slum studies. Yes, the urban poor live mainly in slums (according to a 2008 World Bank study 30 percent of Dhaka's metropolitan population are slum dwellers; however, not all urban poor live in slums). But to frame urban poverty in terms of the inadequacy of urban amenities (such as toilets and piped water supplies) in slums alone is to ignore a deeper social question, perpetuating the disenfranchisement of the urban poor.

This is the question. What is society's attitude towards the "poor"? It is important to revisit this age-old question to disrupt the cycle of urban poverty in a sustainable way.

Last year, I attended an urban poverty

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example to invoke here.

It is not that empirical knowledge of the poor is unnecessary. But without compassion as public policy, big data keeps on calcifying the poor as a category, one that is isolated from any decision-making power structures. Without any real agency, this category is on perpetual